The Making and Meaning of Nobody's Cowboy

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SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: The Making + Meaning of Nobody's Cowboy

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature] Dr. Broadhead, Faculty Mentor

Date: 5/5/03

Comments (Optional):
The Making and Meaning of Nobody’s Cowboy

During their senior year of school, all honors students must complete a senior project. This project is often related to the student’s major, but not necessarily. Every so often, however, a project will come along that is entirely unrelated to anything the student has been involved in during college. I was not trying to be different, it just happened to work out that way.

I am an advertising major involved in several extracurricular activities. I have been involved with several campus organizations while I have been at school. A large part of my freshman and sophomore years were devoted to Student Government. The latter half of my college career has been focused on my advertising curriculum and helping with All Campus Events. So, illogically, I decided my senior project would be writing, arranging, and recording a CD of original music, then evaluating the influences behind my music and lyrics.

In this report, I will discuss my musical history, my musical influences, an in-depth analysis of my songs, and how this project has helped me better understand my music and music as a whole.

So what brought me here?

When I was six, my parents started me in piano lessons. That lasted about a year, or as long as my youth could endure the sacrilege of studying theory on a sunny afternoon. My grammar school years saw music education in
the form of banging on xylophones and singing in the chorus. But when we performed, any clapping was on account of either pity or our cuteness. When I entered junior high, I saw band camp as a way to finally get to play the saxophone. My mom saw band camp as a high alternative to babysitters and TV all day. I stopped the saxophone when high school came along, almost in direct correlation to puberty and extended curfews.

I did not pick up another instrument until the summer before my senior year of high school at a camp in North Carolina. I found a guitar one afternoon and plucked out something that sounded reasonably delightful. Twenty minutes passed and I was searching for more sounds, in awe of the possibility of this simple craft. It was like a puzzle, and my hands were the missing pieces.

I fell hard in love. I started playing along in chapels, a sink-or-swim challenge that I would not let get the best of me. By summer’s close, I was starting to get a hold of some basics. I left that summer with a generous counselor’s backup guitar. During my senior year of high school, when stress was wearing me down, the guitar was a great release. I did not learn much that year, but just having it around kept me curious of what was to come.

After graduation and another summer of learning at camp, I was at college. The guitar stayed in my room, but I did not. I was out and about, meeting all the new people, doing all the new things and soaking up every minute of freedom. That Christmas I asked for a mandolin. My parents reluctantly obliged, thinking I would be better off learning one instrument well
than a lot of instruments slightly. A two-instrument man, I headed back to camp for one final summer, which would happen to bring about quite a change.

We started a bluegrass band that summer, The Black Mountain Oysters, just for fun. Our one problem was that we did not have a singer. Everyone, including myself, had myriads of poor excuses of why they should not sing. I had never had the presence of mind to concentrate on strumming and singing at the same time, not to mention being embarrassed and self-conscious about my voice. However, not being one to back down from a challenge, I volunteered and found myself hollering “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” and strumming the mandolin. It turns out I needed the security and support of the band to help me over that hill. And just like a hill, after you get up the big part, you can just roll down the other side.

I got back to school and started playing and singing several times a week. Not long into the semester, I toyed with writing my own songs. With no idea what I was doing, I started to write songs. I would like to say that the first song I wrote was an unbelievable success. My first song was terrible. My first twenty songs were almost all equally bad. I’d like to think I was just clearing all the junk out to make room for good stuff. Time will tell how long the junk-clearing stage will last.

I began to play at open-mike nights at a coffee shop downtown. The owner used to ask me to play a certain song every time. At first I thought it was because he liked it. I think, though, that it was the song he disliked the least. However, he rewarded my faithfulness. I played every other week and
always came with new material. He promised that if I memorized my songs and got an electric pickup in my guitar that he would let me play on a weekend for a real audience. Maybe three days later I had a pickup and all my songs memorized. Not too long thereafter I was playing in front of the real audience he promised.

People were very encouraging. They were also courteous, offering constructive criticism and suggestions. So I kept on writing. I kept on writing the same things, not thinking about what made my music “My Music.” I wrote in a very stream-of-consciousness manner, understandable by myself and maybe two other people in the world. And those two people might not ever even hear the songs.

Then one afternoon in the summer of 2002 I was thinking about The Black Mountain Oysters and how much fun we had playing. I got a little bluegrass vibe and wrote a song called “Amanda Lynn,” a silly song based entirely on a pun with a traditional bluegrass structure and beat. It was, by far, one of the simplest and easiest songs I had written.

I went and played it for some friends at a church and they loved it. I played it for my family and they loved it. My friends at church invited me to play at a coffee shop concert one night. I played 7 or 8 songs that night. After every song, the people clapped. Much like grammar school chorus, though, it was like they were clapping out of courtesy or as if to show their appreciation that I was finally finished singing. When “Amanda Lynn” was sung, however, it changed everything. People had stopped talking while I was playing, they were
smiling when I finished, and I might have even heard a whistle or two. It was a turning point in my music. I moved from entertaining myself and simply purging my thoughts to entertaining others, giving them things they might just want to hear.

That brings us to my senior honors project. I got an eight-track recorder and a tambourine, borrowed a hand drum and a bass guitar, and set out to record these new songs. After months of recording, re-recording, arranging, mixing, and packaging, I had a CD in my hands that I could call my own. The next step was to dig into my memory and my CD collection, do a little research, and maybe start to realize what has been driving my music all along.

Raised on Radio

Growing up, I had many influences in music. My mother is from south Louisiana and my father is from the Mississippi delta. One of the first songs I can remember my parents singing to me was “Cotton Fields Back Home.” My father loved Hank Williams, Linda Ronstadt, and Little Richard. My mother was a fan of zydeco music and classical composers. The southern roots were definitely strong, but that was not all I heard.

We spent many weekends visiting family in Louisiana and Mississippi, listening to Ricky Skaggs albums, mix tapes of the golden oldies, and Sesame Street’s “In Harmony,” a compilation of children’s songs from artists such as Carly Simon, the Doobie Brothers, and Dr. John. Those countless hours on the
road were filled with music. We would sing along while we were awake, and then listen until we fell asleep.

At home in Memphis, my sister and I would listen to the "Top 8 at 8" or the "Top 9 at 9," depending on the station and our bedtime. Popular music was always a terrific part of my life. Having parents that were not restrictive about my choices in music was a blessing. I could listen to anything I please, as long as it was clean, which was not a problem on the radio.

Somewhere along the way, radio gave way to cassettes and CDs. The first music I ever bought at a store was Queen’s "Bohemian Rhapsody" and Sir Mix-A-Lot’s "Baby Got Back.” I would pay money to see the look on the cashier’s face as the 9-year-old boy laid these on the counter. At that point, I began a large music collection that would only grow in variety.

As the 80's rolled over the 90's and the 90's trudged on to the new millennium, I had developed a very broad taste in music. My CD player spun 70’s pre-punk rock, pop country, classic rock and roll, rap, heavy metal, alternative, and bluegrass on a regular basis. Sometimes I would revert to the cassette deck to get a dose of Aerosmith, Elton John, or John Williams’ soundtrack to Jurassic Park. I installed a custom stereo in my 1985 Pontiac Bonneville so I could be sure to have the most booming bass from Dr. Dre, while still being able to hear the definitive twinkle of Ben Folds’ high piano solos. Nothing in particular held my fancy, but that was a good thing.

As I began making my own music, I did not associate any songs with any specific influences. It was two years later when I decided on this project that I
began to really think about what was driving my music. And it was not until the CD was finished and in my stereo that I was able to sit back and listen to what was motivating my sound.

The seven songs I have chosen to evaluate show a broad range of the influences in my music, and are exemplary of the connections that are made in many of my other songs. Before I begin evaluating the actual songs, I will detail several key influences in my music, establishing them for easy reference in the evaluation portion of the report.

My Influences

_Buck Owens_

Growing up watching Hee Haw, I had no idea what Buck Owens had done for country music. I only remember him as the guy that sang, "pffft, you were gone!" However, long before I was born, he was working hard at establishing his place in music history. And now, Buck Owens is one of the greatest influences in my music.

Buck grew up in the dust bowl, pledging to himself that he did not want to grow up to be hungry or cold when he went to bed. He worked his way up the ladder, playing anywhere that would have him, and always doing good business. He knew that, even though playing barroom music was a typically wild profession, he had to conduct himself like a gentleman. He arrived on time and did, at the very least, the work he had agreed to perform. This ethic kept him employed and also in the favor of those who employed him.
Throughout his rise to fame, Buck was constantly learning and honing a particular sound. He worked a little in AM radio, so when it came time to produce a radio-quality recording of his songs, Buck knew just what he wanted. He knew AM was more suited to trebly, well-enunciated music. Radio, at that time, was not conducive to the “wall of sound” and bass-driven production that clouds the airwaves today. The result of the combination of this AM-friendly arrangement and his fresh electric guitar work is what we know as the Bakersfield sound.

The Bakersfield sound, popularized largely by Buck Owens, was greatly influenced by Bob Wills, “the king of Western swing.” It was carried to new levels by Buck, but died down during the 70’s as popular country began to turn toward the syrupy sound that characterized much of the decade. Dwight Yoakam was a savior for the Bakersfield sound, bringing the beat and his idol, Buck Owens, back into style in the 1980’s. The sound is infectious and catchy, driven by electric guitar riffs and strong melodies. It grabs your attention. It makes you tap your foot and listen. It does what music is supposed to do.

Buck Owens and the Bakersfield sound once revolutionized traditional country, turning many non-country listeners into avid fans. Now, the Bakersfield sound typifies a large part of traditional country. Its influence is evident in a great deal of music today, and especially mine.
Bela Fleck

Bela Fleck is a progressive-bluegrass-jazz musician that has long been expanding the horizons of music and tearing down barriers between specific musical genres. He first picked up a banjo at age 15 after seeing bluegrass legends Flatt & Scruggs. Through high school he played bebop on the banjo, then joined progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival in 1982. Since that time he has formed his own band, the Flecktones, has released or been featured on nearly fifty albums, and has been nominated for Grammy awards in eight categories.

Bela’s music has developed its own category, but the influences I have taken from it come from his bluegrass roots. Much of my music is dependent on a heavy backbeat, derived from the driving rhythms of bluegrass music. Very soon after learning to play guitar, I began listening to Bela Fleck’s earlier bluegrass collaborations. Accompanied by such contemporary legends as Jerry Douglas on dobro and Sam Bush on mandolin and fiddle, he turned the banjo into a voice, making his inventive melodies and utter virtuosity take the place of lyrics. Four albums in particular, Inroads, Daybreak, Drive, Deviation, and Places, have stayed in my regular rotation of music since I bought them. The music does not display popular country and bluegrass “formulas,” meaning the chord progressions and licks that have been so used and repeated that they become institutions, taking some of the magic out of music. However, his music definitely does not ignore those pillars of the genre. It can be likened to a child moving away from home. They want the freedom of living away from
all that has made them into what they are, but no matter how far they go, they will always be made up of what was back home. That remains a great inspiration to me in my music. I try to be clever in song construction; all the while keeping a finger on the pulse of the bluegrass and country that was the reason behind my music’s beginning.

Bela Fleck has changed bluegrass permanently, for the better. His creativity remains an inspiration, and the direct tap into bluegrass roots keeps his music grounded and appealing. After listening to my recordings, it has become apparent that I try, consciously and subconsciously, to mimic Bela Fleck and his style. He is, and will remain, one of the greatest influences behind the actual music, the notes, chords, and melodies that I have created.

Popular Music

Buck Owens and Bela Fleck are two great individual influences. Owens has influence in the area of distinctive sound and popularly appealing music. Fleck’s contribution is in the area of striving for original sound but remembering his ultimate origins. There are other specific individual influences I have, but they can be largely grouped in the category of popular music. By popular music, I mean the music that is on the radio, the music that makes money when it is played.

My radio, since high school, has had presets for pop, rap, country, alternative, and oldies stations. I would not stay satisfied on one station, so I got a lot of influence from across the board. I would take extended breaks
from certain styles at times, but would usually find myself back in familiar territory and enjoying the music again. Researching this seasonal affair, I recognized several great influences in my music.

Ben Folds Five stands out as very influential pop band from my time in high school. They are known for driving piano rock, backed simply by a bass guitar and drums. It is an extremely individual sound, often characterized by, but not limited to, beautiful banging on the piano. They can also effectively perform epic, insightful music and quiet, darker ballads. His songwriting was very practical, new melodies powered by his very capable tenor. The variety, simplicity, and effectiveness of Ben Folds’ unique take on popular music caught my attention and found its way from my radio into my CD collection.

Rap music was a big part of Memphis radio. In such a diverse town, and particularly the diverse school system I grew up in, it would be impossible to avoid rap music. I am very glad I did not avoid it. Rap music has truly been a visible phenomenon that has occurred in my lifetime. Since its inception in the 1970’s, a head-nodding, groove-inspiring feel has characterized rap. Over time, rap has sophisticated itself instrumentally and lyrically into a sound built for stereos, and often recognizing lyrical capability above catchy melodies or musical hooks. The involvement that the listener feels in rap rubbed off on me. I stretch my limits, lyrically, and attempt to put the empowering groove and heavy beats into my music. My music can certainly not be compared to rap in most fashions, but my music would be much different without its influence.
Early in high school, country music caught my attention. The popular acts of the time were very appealing, blending a more pop-like sound with traditional country. After being drawn in by this new country, I became introduced and re-introduced, in some cases, to some older acts. "The Class of 1989" including Travis Tritt, Randy Travis, and Garth Brooks was achieving amazing success, growing into their full potential all the way through the 1990’s. It was the familiar feel that has characterized country music as a "people’s music" that intrigued me. It felt very inviting and comfortable, which, later on would lead me to start forming my music in the same fashion.

Specific acts George Strait and Alison Krauss have surfaced as influences on my music. George Strait has recently reached one of music’s ultimate goals. He has recorded 52 number one singles, more than any other artist in any category of music in history. This unbelievable feat is driven by the strict traditional nature of Strait’s music. He has consistently produced mainstream music that is deeply rooted in traditional country music. His success is a reminder that truly good music and high standards are recognized. The resistance to change at the whim of popular opinion has worked in his favor, creating a solid performer with an unflappable image and unparalleled respect in the popular country world.

Alison Krauss, along with her band, Union Station, are great influences in my music. Dan Tyminski, the voice behind the biggest single in recent music history, "Man of Constant Sorrow," is the lead guitarist and harmony vocalist. Jerry Douglas, who I mentioned played often with Bela Fleck, tours with Union
Station and appears on their music videos, as well. They, much like George Strait, represent a very traditional approach to popular music. Alison Krauss was steeped in gospel music before her acceptance into the popular country circle. Although popular country has welcomed them, Alison Krauss and Union Station have not changed their ways. Their latest album is still fresh with bluegrass, gospel, and a light southern sound. They have changed with the times, but not lost hold of their traditional roots and sound, making them one of the most solid and staying bands in country music.

When I would tire of new music and the popular stations, I would often flip over to the oldies station. The music on this station was time-tested. People had their turns to like it and maybe grow tired of it, but it comes back again and people still enjoy it. At the same time it gets an entirely new audience. The ability to create timeless music is one of my goals, music that grandparents can enjoy listening to with their grandchildren. It is an extremely lofty goal and there is no formula for reaching it. I could only take hints from the music I heard on the oldies station.

Several musicians along the way have proven their mettle and stand out as influences in my music. James Taylor greatly influenced my initial playing of guitar. The sweet melodies and simple guitar work that characterized his music were easy to imitate, up in my room sitting with my guitar. His references to seasons and growth and other familiar topics inspired my songwriting. It is appealing to old and young, and covers a wide range of style, from ballad to rock to blues. The Rolling Stones' occupy a different place, as
far as sound is concerned, but their staying power is unbelievable. The sound created by their heavy guitar riffs and infectious melodies has long passed the test of time and every day is bounding further into an incomparably legendary status. They might not appeal the same to grandparents and grandchildren, but they embody rock and roll, creating a consummation of rhythm and blues and pop music. Both the Rolling Stones and James Taylor, lyrically and musically, have had great influences on my music and my drive to make it timeless.

Another singer-songwriter in the same vein as James Taylor, John Mayer came on to the pop scene later in my college career. His staying power will be determined over time, but he is faring very well right now. At the last Grammy awards he took home Best Male Pop Vocal Performance, beating out several talented artists, including Sir Elton John, Sting, and even James Taylor. The production of his album was a key in its success. In an age where a simple guitar and vocals will not land a spot on the radio, Mayer has just turned his sound up a notch, adding in his own virtuoso guitar solos, simple percussion, and the occasional accordion. The “new” singer-songwriter, in order to compete on a popular music level, will need to follow John Mayer’s lead and take advantage of the wealth of sound that is now readily available to them. John Mayer is reminiscent of the earlier pop songwriters, which helps him appeal to a much larger audience. Taking advantage of all that is available to him, John Mayer has been an influence by showing how you should manage your talents.
All of these popular artists and genres have had their separate and unique effect on my music. The combination of musical, lyrical, and stylistic influences is paired with the business aspects of appeal, production, and staying power to create an entire, great influence behind my music. The idea of making a career out of music brings into account all of the elements of popular music and somewhat trivializes the actual musical content of a person’s music. However, all of the artists and influences I mentioned have maintained certain standards and produced quality music that is very timely. This is evidenced by their staying power and their unforgettable marks on music.

**Traditional Music**

Popular music is a great part of my music, especially since I plan to pursue music and make a living off of it. The influences behind my music, however, reach much further than the songs that are on the radio right now. All popular music right now has been influenced by earlier music, and mine is no different. There are definite links to traditional music throughout my recordings. By traditional music, I mean music that might not be on the radio, but it familiar to most people.

Songs like “You Are My Sunshine” and “This Little Light of Mine” are examples of this traditional music. “You Are My Sunshine” is considered to be one of the most recognizable songs in the world, but you probably would not
know who wrote it. These traditional influences are the ones that I might not be able to pinpoint, but they have been in my life since the day I was born. In some way, somehow, I am sure that “Happy Birthday” has had an effect on the music I write. Traditional music has undeniably had an effect on my music, as will be evidenced in detailed song explanations following in this report.

When I began playing mandolin and singing with The Black Mountain Oysters, the songs we sang were old gospel tunes, traditional hymns, and timeless music like “Oh, Susanna.” Much like the popular musicians I mentioned in the last section, these traditional hymns and songs have stood the test of time. “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain” and “Amazing Grace” are as legendary as the Rolling Stones and George Strait, if not more. Since these songs were the first songs I ever knew how to play and sing, they were what I would practice. So, essentially, the bedrock of my music is made up of this traditional music.

I think this is the best possible situation for my music background. I would much rather be coached by Vince Lombardi and Knute Rockne than the greatest coaches of my time. I know many people whose music is inspired and based largely on specific popular acts that might have already fallen by the wayside. When that happens, everything that their music is based on has passed, taking a part of their music with it. But with a base in traditional music, I hope that my music will borrow from its strength and timelessness and be much harder to forget. These are gargantuan hopes and might never be
realized, but if it is going to happen, I will only benefit from having such a traditional base in my music.

I could continue talking in-depth about my musical influences, but it will not make full sense until you hear and read the music that I have written and recorded. So now we have reached the interesting part of the report. I will discuss seven of my songs, each in fair detail, pointing out the specific influences behind the music, the arrangement, and the lyrics. I will do my best to provide sufficient reason and explanation, but these are truly displays of art, and might not be understood easily and equally. Again, all music was written and copyrighted by me in 2002-2003.

My Music

Amanda Lynn

Amanda Lynn, Amanda Lynn, honey, where do I begin?
I loved you since the first time that I saw you way back when
I don’t think you realize the mess you got me in
I’m in love with Amanda Lynn

Saving all my money for Amanda Lynn
I’ve learned all about her talking to her friends
Her voice, it makes me tremble and her curves, they never end
I’m in love with Amanda Lynn

My parents have their own opinions of Amanda Lynn
She makes my mama nervous, she makes my Daddy grin
My friends have got to wondering if they’ll see me again
Now that I’m in love with Amanda Lynn

Like the devil needs sin, like the kite needs wind,
Like the ink needs a pen, baby I need you
Do you understand that when you’re in my hand
There ain’t no telling what we can do

Amanda Lynn, Amanda Lynn, honey, where do I begin?
I loved you since the first time that I saw you way back when
I don't think you realize the mess you got me in
I'm in love with Amanda Lynn

It's been seven years now, with Amanda Lynn
Every day I hope our days together never end
Sure she makes me angry and I do my share of cursin’
But it's a whole lot easier than livin' with a person
I'm telling you she's a heaven sent,
I'm in love with an instrument.
I'm in love with a mandolin. The end.

This was the song that changed everything for my music. It is simple, easy, and short. It was a minute shorter than most other songs I had written, but it was the only song that people remembered when I was done playing. This is probably because of the pun with “a mandolin,” but it’s also a fun song to hum along with. It has influences ranging from Ben Folds to traditional gospel music.

The lyrical structure is very simple: five verses and one bridge. There is no definitive chorus, other than the repeated line “I’m in love with Amanda Lynn.” It is short and sweet, and easily carries the listener from verse to verse. This can be traced to real traditional country and early country songs. Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, and countless other classic songwriters used a formula like this to keep the listener in their seat, waiting on the next verse, while giving them enough musical variety to stay interested. Some of their other songs were more complex, but more famous ones like “Hey Good Lookin’” and “On the Road Again” attest to the appeal of this lyrical style of country song.

Musically, there is much influence from the traditional song “This Little Light of Mine,” written originally by Harry Dixon Loes. I did not realize this
similarity until long after I had written “Amanda Lynn.” The summer after I got back from playing with The Black Mountain Oysters, I was so enthralled with my new ability to sing and play guitar that I recorded all the songs we had sung onto a tape deck at my house. “This Little Light of Mine” was one of our favorite songs to play, and apparently it ingrained itself into my subconscious. While going through all of my tapes, I found this recording, and immediately knew the relation. There are slight and noticeable differences, but the general musical idea of the songs are the same. This is noticeable in many country songs, today. Bill Monroe’s bluegrass classic “Walk Softly on This Heart of Mine” has almost an identical melody as Joe Diffie’s much newer “Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox (If I Die).” “Amanda Lynn” has a solid base in this well-known Sunday school song, which might be the reason that people seem to like it. It is familiar enough to be comfortable, but not so much that they are the same song.

The melody is similar to “This Little Light of Mine,” but there are a few cues in the vocals that point to other influences. Ben Folds likely instilled the falsetto at the end of each third verse (“...mess you got me IN,” “...curves, they never END”). Listening to my old CD’s, his constant use of falsetto was a standout feature of his vocals. He has a similar range to my voice, so I sang along with his albums when I was first learning how to sing. It might be attributed to Hank Williams, as he was one of my father’s favorite records growing up, but it is less of the valve-like yodel of Hank and more of an easy high note like Ben Folds.
As a whole, this song draws on an eclectic variety of influences. The tune is traditional and familiar, but the theme and the vocals offer a newer approach, creating a fun song. I often think about “Amanda Lynn” as my personal inspiration, because it came together so naturally and quickly. It was recognized far more often than some of my most musically complicated or impressive songs. It reminds me that a song is as good as it is in its simplest form, unobstructed by grandiose chord progressions or fluff in the arrangement.

I Can’t Win

It’s a quarter to three when you come strollin’ in
I probably won’t ask where you’ve been, cause I can’t win, I can’t win.
I got a good idea where you’ve been tonight
But I’m alone if I’m wrong and a fool if I’m right, so I can’t win. No I can’t win.

You took my poor heart for a spin, now I’m taking it on the chin
I guess that I’ll just bear it and grin, oh ’cause I can’t win.

Would you believe I fell for it again
She’s leaving me to hang like a leaf out in the wind, and I can’t win, I can’t win.

Just when I think I got you pinned
You turn around and put me right back in my place
I gotta face the fact that if you leave you’re not coming back
I realize right then that I can’t win, no I can’t win

You took my poor heart for a spin, now I’m taking it on the chin
I guess that I’ll just bear it and grin, oh ’cause I can’t win.

This song shows a single example of influence, but a strong one for many of my songs. When the song begins, it is really driven by the down-beat. It is a solid, almost rock and roll beat. However, when it reaches the chorus, the up-beat emerges, a characteristic of bluegrass music. It is present in a majority of the music that I think of as traditional bluegrass. It is a musically simple song,
and it never seemed that complicated to me. However, when I let people
listen to it, many commented that it was “really different,” some even saying
“confusing.” They said that it felt like the tempo was changing at some points.
I admit that the tempo does slightly change, but that is my fault in recording
without a metronome or drummer. Aside from that, the song’s tempo actually
does stay the same, but the transfer from down-beat to up-beat makes it really
stand out. I was not sure where I came up with the idea for that type of a
change, but with enough research I found it.

The influence likely came from Bela Fleck’s album Places, specifically a
song called “Lowdown.” It is much like all of Fleck’s songs from his bluegrass
and newgrass days, catchy and punchy. It is driven by the banjo and peppered
with mandolin, guitar, and banjo solos. The same transfer from down-beat to
up-beat, and back and forth, occurs several times in “Lowdown.” Many of the
solos are backed by the powerful down-beat, while the melodic verse is carried
forward by a skipping, light up-beat. I have included a copy of this song on the
enclosed CD, which should shed some light on what I am detailing. This,
although a seemingly small influence, was one of the greater discoveries I
made, partly because of the realization of the capabilities and effects of a
seemingly subtle change.

Not About You

This song is not about the feeling
That you’d give me when you’d walk into the room
It’s not about our dreams or the sunrises we’ve seen
This song is not about you
This song is not about a promise
That I thought was true
It's not about how real that your smile made me feel
This song is not about you

CHORUS:
Cause I've got better ways to spend my time
I've got better things to do
Than sit here alone just to write this song
That's not about you

This song is not about the day
You made rain fall from a sky so blue
It's not about the nights that I couldn't sleep for crying
This song is not about you

CHORUS
No more living in the past
Cause that's the last thing I need to do
I'll move along as soon as I convince myself this song is not about you
I'll move along as soon as I convince myself this song is not about you

There are some very simple, but very evident influences in this song.
This is one of my more recent songs, with a very standard construction of
verses and choruses with one bridge. I like it for its simplicity and the simple
truth of the lyrics. I usually do not attach personal ideas or experiences with
songs, because when I do they get mangled into something unrealistic just to
fit the song or make a stronger impact. This is no exception. It began with the
thought of past romantic interest, and I thought the idea of the song could be
enhanced with a little emotional embellishment.

The Carly Simon song "You're So Vain" is one of the big influences
behind it. I am not worried about any copyright battles, however, because the
subject of this song is more on the "me," not the "you." My family brought me
up with James Taylor and Joni Mitchell and that earthy songwriter crowd, and
Carly Simon was naturally a staple in my parents' record rotation. I remember
thinking she was a very pretty lady, and I liked the songs, too. It was not until
later that I realized the subject matter, which made it even more interesting to hear. So when I heard the song again my senior year of college, after having ended a strange relationship the past summer, I figured it would be both a good homage to Ms. Simon and an emotional purging for me to write a similar song. My message is more general and universal than Carly’s suspiciously specific taunts, but it is the same idea of “I’m SO over you... aren’t I?”

Musically, this song takes large direction from Alison Krauss’ “I Don’t Believe You’ve Met My Baby.” It, like in the case of “Amanda Lynn,” is not nearly a direct facsimile of the song, but it has a lot in common with it. The reason I think it is an important influence in this song is the hopefulness of the music. It is a very traditional chord progression, with a few slight aberrations included for originality. Alison Krauss’ song follows a story through to a happy ending. So I knew that the ending of my song could be happy, as well, with a similar sound.

_Rise to the Rain_

A year ago today, the sun stopped shining on my heart
I still wait for it to shine again, I’m only asking

CHORUS:
Do you remember the days, we would rise to the sun?
You knew that day would come, the sun would hide away, and we would rise to the rain.

Just a memory of you, running through my head all day long.
Tell the truth, would you be the same if you never knew my name?

CHORUS

So much left to tell and there’s so much more to say
These clouds may never clear
Love is not a game, and I still think of your name, every time I rise to the rain.

A year ago today, the sun stopped shining on my heart.
One of the most impressive songs on John Mayer’s critically acclaimed second album, *Room for Squares*, is “3 x 5.” It is a little enlightenment, telling the audience about what he saw when he put his camera away. He had been so busy trying to capture these scenes on a 3x5 piece of paper that he was missing the true experience. The song is in a minor key, which is an immediate attention-getter. It makes you pay attention and find out what is about to be said, because it will probably be meaningful or somber. So when I wrote “Rise to the Rain” in a minor key, I chose somber. It, too, is a coming-of-age, in saying that even the greatest things will sometimes be covered in clouds. Those clouds might just be rolling through, but they might settle in for a good stay. Lyrically, the songs are different, but their themes are both serious, as driven largely by the minor key.

On the album, John Mayer’s song has a very unique accordion background in the song. “3 x 5” begins reliant on the accordion and a prominent up-beat. For “Rise to the Rain,” I did not have access to an accordion. So I ran my mandolin’s sound through an effects processor and added an echo that helped it to be more sustained. The resulting sound begins the song in the same mood. The mandolin dies down during the song, but on the choruses and the instrumental parts, it picks back up, accenting the minor key and the mood of the song. This was the first time I had really heard something prior and liked it so much I tried to make my music sound like it. It showed me how simple it was to effectively re-create an emotion or effect by just using a simple sound or pattern.
"Willie Nelson Hole"

Well I may never be a real big star
You probably will not see me around this town in a fancy car
I'll never see my name in the hall of fame
But I want a Willie Nelson Hole in my guitar

I want a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar
Is that too much to ask, it shouldn't be that hard
But no matter how much I play
The wood won't melt away
All I want's a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar

Well my request may seem a tad bizarre
But I've asked about a million times and haven't had any luck so far
Sometimes I think I should just saw away the wood
And make a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar

I want a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar
Is that too much to ask, it shouldn't be that hard
But no matter how much I play
The wood won't melt away
All I want's a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar

Any day now's fine with me, birthday, easter, new year's eve
But it seems all my requests have been ignored
Whatever it takes, no I won't stop
Till there's a splintery hole in my guitar top
And this time if you dismiss it
I'll ask Santa Claus for Christmas for a

Willie Nelson hole in my guitar
Is that too much to ask, it shouldn't be that hard
But no matter how much I play
The wood won't melt away
All I want's a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar
All I want's a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar
All I want's a Willie Nelson hole in my guitar

The theme of "Willie Nelson Hole" revolves around the actual hole that is worn in Trigger, Willie Nelson's guitar. It got there from years of hard playing and road wear. The symbolism of the hole is a lot deeper than just the worn-away wood. It symbolizes an entire movement in country music. Willie Nelson, along with Waylon Jennings and several other country singers seeking to re-center the focus of country music, headed up the "Outlaw Movement." It was a return to the roots of country, re-traditionalizing a musical form that had
strayed afar, driven by money and over-production. Willie bucked the system, demanding that his music be played on AM and FM stations, crossing over into rock and roll’s territory. The result was great success, earning him rapid toppen status. He was not out for the fame, though, he just wanted to share his music. He has become one of the most successful and long-lived stars and songwriters of all-time. He still plays that same old guitar, though. In a time when guitars are smashed on stage and left for dead, Willie carries Trigger on through scratches and scrapes. This time when artists have seven complimentary guitars onstage at a time, each tuned differently and for a different purpose, Willie keeps Trigger strapped around his neck and does all the technical work on his own. He embodies the truth of music. Although he could easily afford to buy a new guitar for each song he plays, his music is not about the gleam of a shining guitar. Trigger represents the roots and the truth of country music, the way it is supposed to be. This song acts, as much as I can make it, as a slightly envious tribute to Willie Nelson and what he has done.

This song, in the same vein as “Amanda Lynn,” is one of the silliest songs I have written, but also one of the best received. People recognize the pop-icon of Willie Nelson, and the almost equally iconic Trigger, and listen. It is a real toe-tapping beat, driven, again, by the up-beat. One of the greatest influences in the music of this song was evident only after completing the recording with all accompaniments. The electric guitar that kicks in between the first and second lines of the song is direct homage to Buck Owens. The characteristic sound, the trademark twang that drove such songs as “Hello
Trouble” and “Santa Looked a Lot Like Daddy” is evident in “Willie Nelson Hole.” People hear the start of the song, and are intrigued, but as soon as the electric guitar kicks in, they are absolutely hooked. I set out to make a guitar riff that would be as identifiable as possible. With the addition of a little distortion and bluesy-effects, my beat-up old electric guitar seemed a lot more powerful and meaningful.

This song started as a silly ditty, but it became a lot more important to me. It is my little tribute to two of the most important forces in music, country music in particular. It might come across as a funny song, and it should, but the influences of Willie Nelson and Buck Owens are prominent and very important to realize in the total understanding of the song.

_Tennessee_
It’s midnight, do you know where I am?  
I’m in your heart like I promised I would be  
But something stole my soul along the way  
I think that I might find it in Tennessee

500 country miles of homegrown heart  
where how a man lives his life is what he’s worth  
The crowning jewel atop the shining south  
As close to heaven as you’ll find yourself on this earth

From the Mississippi river to the hills  
The only thing that’s missing is me  
I think I’d better leave my heart with you  
And go to join my soul in Tennessee

God’s country stretching out it’s open arms  
To put a spring in my step and a wink in my smile  
I’d better find a place to settle down  
I think that I might be here for a while

You’ve still got time to make up your mind  
And pack up all your things to come with me  
We both would be much better off that way  
And I’ve have my heart and soul in Tennessee  
And happily ever after we would be  
With my heart and soul in Tennessee
This song takes its major cues, musically and lyrically from my pop-country experience. The first country CD that I bought was Clint Black’s *No Time to Kill* that featured “I’ll Take Texas,” a lighthearted and chipper tribute to his home state. It had become one of my favorite songs about a place, so I had it as my basis when I decided I should write a song about Tennessee. I wanted something fun and serious at the same time. The musical influence comes largely from George Strait’s “All My Ex’s Live in Texas.” There is a definite similarity in Strait’s line “that’s why I hang my hat in Tennessee” and my line “I think that I might find it in Tennessee.” It is not a blatant sample, and actually did not come to my attention until after I had written the song. As I have mentioned before in this paper, however, much of country music is so homogenous that such similarities are commonplace.

In my desire to make and present fresh music, I have stopped playing this song in public, just because the idea seems trite and overused. Perhaps one day I will dig it back out of my songbook, but not until I have established the originality and genuineness of my own music. It has been a good lesson to learn about my music, and when I begin to write a song that sounds familiar, I usually stop and do a U-turn in my thought and musical direction. The situation of “Tennessee,” if anything, has made my music fresher and better.

*Train Wreck*

Love is a rose? Is that how the song goes? Well, Lord knows, you could take a hint from that I’d be hard pressed to believe that soft and sweet would ever be The way that you love me
Cause you love me like a train wreck
Like a 20 car crash, like a wildfire burning
Like a knockdown drag-out smashed-in banged-up no-holds-barred
Winner-take-all if he gets that far
And the flames keep getting higher
Your love is like a train wreck baby, and I'm the sole survivor

Hot and fast? How long can this last?
I'll ask again, but I don't really want to know
If it's one night or if it's a while
Cause this bad girl's driving this good boy wild
And I don't wanna go home

CHORUS

When the smoke clears, you'll see
Rising up from the ashes
It's gonna be me, cause you love me

CHORUS

This song has the most eclectic influences, as a whole, as any that I have written. Starting with the simple, driving rhythm and the lyric structure, it is very influenced by rap music. The popping beat and quickened pace of the lyrics hooks the listener and keeps their attention. When we reach the chorus, the influence changes over to country music. The wordy, quickly delivered description is reminiscent of “The Grundy County Auction” by John Michael Montgomery, which also relies on lightning-fast lines and a clever idea to drive the audience to the edge of their seats waiting for the next verse. After the music had been recorded and the electric guitar was laid into the instrumental sections between each chorus and verse, I realized how much influence there was from classic rock and roll. The Rolling Stones, America's most successful and long-lived rock and roll group, rely on simple, quick guitar riffs and thundering beats to maintain the power of their music. In listening to my music collection, I realized that the sound of the guitar effect that I had picked
for “Train Wreck” and the blues style of the riff was very influenced by those classic rock and roll acts like Creedence Clearwater Revival and The Rolling Stones.

“Train Wreck” has become one of my favorite songs, simply because of its variety in influence and the power that it draws on from those influences. The fever and drive of the rap music blends with the tradition and temptation of the country roots and lyrical influences. Add to those elements the distinct electric guitar solos and it is a very exciting song. It is appealing and energetic. The beauty of it is that it was written almost entirely in the shower. While many of the songs I have reviewed in this paper have taken hours or sometimes weeks and months to perfect, this song just bloomed. I knew the tune, the style, and the feel just by repeating the chorus over and over in the shower one morning. It goes to show that it is sometimes best to let your instincts take control of any thought, and just let what is inside spill out. “Train Wreck” evidences this if only by the influences. There are three starkly distinct influences that all combine to make a solid sounding, well-delivered song.

That’s a Wrap

We have reached the end of the analysis of my songs, music, and lyrics. The research involved in such a project was surprisingly extensive and demanding. At first, the idea sounded more fun than interesting, but the
tables quickly turned. It was much more difficult than I had planned. Tritely, it was also far more rewarding than I would have thought. The end result of the hours of analysis and research of both my music and all the music in my life has proved far more educational than any other project I would have undertaken.

Finding such a broad range of influences came as a surprise even to me. If you had asked me several months ago, which one of my songs takes a cue from "This Little Light of Mine" and the vocal style of Ben Folds, I would not have had a clue. And I definitely would not have described "Train Wreck" to someone as a mixture of classic rock and pop country with roots in rap. The scope of the project widened with each factor, from my musical history to my radio and CD listening habits. Each factor was very necessary in understanding where my music is based and what I can expect from it in the future. The results and conclusions I have come to will not limit me in my musical thought, conversely they will remind me to continue listening to a wide array of music. I will be reminded every time I listen to my music that it is very special and individual, but so much has come before to make it that way. This has been an exercise in memory and in-depth analysis, with true and visible results. By far, this has been the most beneficial and rewarding research project I have ever completed.

As you can see by the length of this paper, I am not adept at describing my music quickly. A quick description of my music might generalize it as "pop-folk country with roots in bluegrass," but it is more than that. It is the
amalgamation of all that I have been describing in this report. My music is made by spending a childhood in Memphis, TN, spending the weekends on the highways and in the Mississippi delta or southern Louisiana. My music is more than country or pop or folk, it is a vibrant display of numerous musical styles and influences. With each influence that my music draws on, it becomes more unique and special to me and to the listener.

In conclusion, I may never reap any financial benefits for the music I make. This project may be the closest my music ever comes to being recorded. At this point, the making of my CD and the money spent on strings and picks and guitars far eclipses any monetary rewards I have received by playing at coffee shops or selling CDs. However, the rewards of hearing a person say "I can't stop listening to your CD!" or "I don't even know how to describe your music, it's definitely not country, and it's not folk...it's just good!" are far greater and more important than having a few extra dollars in my pocket. As long as I continue to play music, I will continue to remember the influences that go into all I do. It will not be a controlling factor in my music, but a very respected and cherished aspect. The results of this project will long outlive a lot of the things I have learned in college.

In an attempt to be poetic, you can liken these discoveries about music to the rain. For a long time, you may have only known that it was raining, and that amazed you. Then one day you discover what rain is, where it comes from, and how truly fascinating it is. You will not forget that, but you do not
let it control your thoughts about rain. In the end, the next time it rains, it is still just raining, but it is more amazing than you had ever remembered.
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